

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019

www.ijellh.com

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A Saga of Marital Life and Marital Discord in Manju Kapur's *Custody*

Abstract: Marriage is one of the greatest events in the life of any individual. It marks the beginning of a new existence. All societies have viewed it as the most important occasion not only for the individual, but also for the survival and well-being of the community. Sadly, the current social set up in the modern Indian society shows that the traditional idea of marriage has changed tremendously. The conflict between tradition and modernity is the core issue in the transition era and has been dealt with as a customary theme. Manju Kapur's fifth novel *Custody* is an excellent example of a fragmented marriage, its consequences and its effects on

children who are played like pawns in a game of legal chess. Her novels deal with everything that is related to the modern family and the patriarchal society.

Keywords: *Custody*, family, society, patriarchy, marital life, marital discord

Manju Kapur, a well-known name in modern Anglo-Indian Literature is widely known as the Jane Austen of India. Her novels are about the modern family and the patriarchal society. Her works present the contemporary picture of today's woman who is eager to break free from the domestic walls of their house to build a world of her own. Her writings show the emergence of a new woman who wants to forge an identity for herself. By the late seventies and eighties many women writers emerged with the issues related to women dealing with their family problems, domestic violence, law, household, health care, education, their work and their working conditions. Manju Kapur takes her protagonist's one step ahead of the others with the burning issues of modern world such as lesbianism, infidelity, infertility, divorce, adoption etc. The paper aims at bringing out the marital life and the marital discord in Manju Kapur's *Custody*

The contemporary social scenario speaks of a world where nuclear family is the norm. The family patterns and individual roles have also undergone a drastic change. The determination to stay married is no longer an important goal. Instead, Happiness has taken its place. Factors such as sex, personality trait, cultural background and the sharing of values and attitudes play an important role in matters of marital adjustment. Mutual faith and understanding also play a vital role in the institution of marriage. Marriage is a very important social institution that is responsible for orderliness and harmony in society. It is one of the greatest events in the life of any individual. It marks the beginning of a new existence. Professor Robert P. George in his book *The Clash of Orthodoxies* considers marriage a

“multi-level relationship: that is, a relationship that unites persons at the bodily, emotional, dispositional and spiritual levels of their being.” All societies have viewed it as the most important event not only for the individual, but also for the survival and well-being of a community.

Every society has most carefully defined and regulated the customs concerning this event. Sadly, the current social scene of the modern Indian society shows a great change in the traditional idea of marriage. Emancipation of woman has given them opportunity to take up higher education and gainful employment, which has compelled them to fight for equality with men even in their married life. This conflict between tradition and modernity is the sole trend of the transition era and has been dealt with frequently as the main problem of the institution of marriage. Dr. Promilla Kapur in her research work observes that marriage which was a sacrament solemnized primarily of the fulfillment of one's duty and for the good and welfare of the family has shifted to the concept that marriage is a good of the individual and for his or her personal happiness and satisfaction.

The plot of *Custody* is set in the backdrop of an urban upper middle class family of Delhi, who despite being affluent are impoverished in values and morals. Kapur explores the hollowness of modern life as the story revolves around the couple Raman and Shagun and the charismatic Ashok Khanna, Raman's boss, and Ishita, a childless divorcee. Kapur uses the institution of marriage in this novel to tell the story of four adults and two children. A series of dispute follow along with arguments and heated discussions exposing the evil side of divorce.

Custody starts with the very first scene involving a love scene of a couple but the ironic side of the story is that it is not the love affair of husband and wife as it looks, but the love-making scene of a wife with her husband's boss. It is a story of Raman and Shagun, a couple who could be envied of having everything. Raman is a hardworking good man who has a high

paying marketing job. His wife Shagun is beautiful and gorgeous who has a boy named Arjun and a girl Roohi. Shagun accompanies Raman to his gala office parties also. They both reap the monetary benefits and live a high profile lifestyle. Ishita who is a young divorcee, is from the other part of the city, in a colony governed by far more traditional bonds. She breaks the ties of marriage when she realizes that she cannot have children. She strives to find happiness, peace and satisfaction indulging her in social work. Shagun falls in love with Raman's boss and takes away the children to bargain for a divorce. Raman's life is shattered. There is ripple in his quiet life; the edifice of his family collapse like a pack of cards.

The novel describes the marital life and the marital discord of both the protagonists Shagun and Ishita. The novel is an excellent example of a fragmented marriage and its consequences on children who are played like pawns in a game of legal chess. Before marriage Shagun wants to become a model and whenever she meets Ashok Khanna that dream again raises in her mind. She could not agree her suffocation. She wants to do something to a luxury life. It results in separation, divorce, remarriage and elevation of *Custody* of hostage between the battles of the parents. Shagun does not accept her fate as dutiful housewife. When Raman discovers their love affair, Shagun has to decide what she wants to do, or what she can do. She asks Raman for a divorce but he turns into a vengeful person. In the second half of the novel, the story focuses on the *Custody* of the children, the bitter legal battle and the price of freedom.

Custody presents the devastating effects of divorce on different stakeholders of a family – the wife, husband, children and in-laws. It opens with the description of the arranged marriage between Shagun and Raman: "Raman and Shagun's marriage had been arranged along standard lines, she the beauty, and he the one with brilliant prospects"(14). Raman worked hard to give her a good life. She had two lovely children and everything she wanted. In spite of all this, Raman was denied the central position in his family. She was searching for

something like passion. She falls in love with Ashok, Raman's boss in the beverage company. Only to marry with him she wants divorce from Raman, and when it is denied she kidnaps the children. The battle runs to the court of justice where it is further delayed only to be settled by mutual understanding. Meanwhile, Arjun and Roohi - children of Shagun and Raman, suffer for no fault of theirs. "Roohi" scrying fits, Arjun's traumas and sleepovers at friends' houses, Raman coming home late, late, late, this was the norm." (105) The novelist artistically weaves the plot throwing light on the fate of the children in such broken marriages. Kapur says:

And here I have been thinking that although none of the characters come out wholly shinning, you do sympathize with them all! Misery, anxiety, tension does bring out the worst in us- that would apply to any conflictive situation.

Where children are concerned, ones deepest feelings are at stake, and provoke all kinds of extreme behavior.(106)"

Amid the demands of the four grown-ups Raman, Shagun, Ashok and Ishita in this tale of broken marriages, the children remain quietly in the background until the novel's second half. It is then that we begin to see the disastrous side-effects of the bitter fight for their *Custody*, the tyranny of blood and their trauma, torn between two mothers, two homes and two countries. It is suggested that security was not happiness, and that neither depended on fertility or a husband's sexuality. In the conjugal disruption, the most affected person undeniably is children. The innocent children are the victims of broken marriages. Children's relationships with their parents play a major role in the progression of their life. Arjun and Roohi in this novel inhabit a worth mentioning disposition. Their role takes an imperative juncture in the second half of the novel. Through these two characters Manju Kapur has documented the consequences of marital disruption in the minds of children. In this novel the three stages of Arjun are highlighted. The first stage is Arjun's stance and life before his

parent's animosity and failed relationship. The second stage is Arjun's mental conflict during sudden divergence from his best friend none other than his father Raman. And the final stage is his new school life at DPA, which helps him break his loneliness and avoid so many thorny question that he might face from his old school friends and teachers.

There is another marriage in *Custody* between Ishita and Suryakanta which fails because of Ishita's infertility. Ishita's marriage collapses because she cannot have children of her own. She tries to find some satisfaction and a sense of identity in social work but she abandons it when she meets the divorced Raman. Since she is drawn to him she believes she can be happy as a step mother. Without being judgmental or preachy, Kapur showcases the typical middle class mentality of Indian families, particularly, in tackling situations like this. The well-knit story reveals the layers of dirt that are hidden behind the happy family. However, the most interesting thing is Kapur's idea of bringing together two divorcees, Ishita and Raman as a successful couple. In this novel we find Kapur's own definition of marriage: "Marriage is when two people decide to live together forever. Should they change their minds they go to court and get marriage cancelled, Finished, Divorced. They become strangers; sometimes they never see each other again. (341) According to Mithu Banerji (2011), "Kapur's book reveals the unimagined uncertainties of matrimony. The wife's sense of suffocation, the husband's fear of loneliness and the constant shifting of the children, like commodities from one home to the other, are evoked with painstaking sincerity.

While the parents are embroiled in a legal battle for *Custody* of the children, they do everything they can to make the children feel worse. Their son is a replica of Shagun's selfish, cruel and indifferent to anything but his own satisfaction and their daughter is a miniature of Raman, who is very loving, understanding and generous. The children find their own ways to tackle the crisis because they are confused and feel that divided loyalties swarm around them, throwing them into tough, emotionally disturbing situations with their parents.

And for any child, having to choose between parents is the toughest and most emotionally devastating thing to contend with. This is when the quiet, reliable cousin Nandan steps in to help Raman who is totally clueless about how the legal system works in India. Worst of all, he begins to realize that marriage to Shagun whom he had loved blindly had been a big mistake, one for which his children too would pay a heavy price. Who will get *Custody* of the kids? - This becomes the question for Raman and Shagun. Their legal battle turns inevitably ugly.

Throughout the novel, a true story of modern marriage exists around us. This is true in today's world. The novel highlights the voice of the children and sheds light on their situation when parents are replaced by lawyers and lovers. It is story of marriage that disintegrates and intertwines with cruel and heart-rending consequences. Once lovers and companions, Raman and Shagun now become enemies for an ugly legal battle over their two children. She shows how a modern house wife can think of not wanting to stay in a relationship and look for liberation and happiness outside her home and even that did not make one wants to hate her for her choices. Achieving this balance is art and *Custody* did that balance.

The novelist brings out the conflict of respective ambitions which seem to be turning into passion. Manju Kapur unfolds some of the basic ingredients of human relation, especially the husband-wife relationship. In the modern time, the concept of human relationship is changing due to various imposing and conflicting situations. The novel suggests how man-woman relationship is on the verge modernity. A sense of dissatisfaction, horror, terror and misunderstanding, lack of devotion, miscommunication and continuous search of identity are prevalent in *Custody* in the delineation of husband-wife relationship.

Manju Kapur not only depicts the bitter battle for the *Custody* of Arjun and Roohi but also the problem that creep into the middle class family with the influx of money. Kapur

points out the traditional Indian values that women are reared on come into contact with other world. She also touches on how the court cases drag on and legal system prolong and further complicate on *Custody* issue. Kapur's art of storytelling is lucid, perceptive and sympathetic. She pathetically brings about the pain of the children who remain quietly in the background until the novel's second half.

Thus, *Custody* is the riveting story of how family-love can disintegrate into an obsession to possess children, body and soul. It is also a chilling critique of the Indian judicial system. The story represents an emerging group of young, successful, educated Indians who can choose the direction of their destiny so easily no matter what the underlying moral implications are like. Kapur's narrative in *Custody* deals with the marriages that collapse, social hypocrisies and battles for children that intertwine with anguish and conflict in order to depict a worldwide reality of politics of possessiveness and unequal power relations in normative patriarchal families which is a site for constraint, oppression, violence, possessiveness and disintegration.

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